

The Lao government in 2014 continued to pursue economic opening while tightening control over political space. The government drafted or passed several regulations that could further restrict freedom of association and expression, as well as exacerbate discrepancies in property ownership rights between Lao citizens and foreign investors. Most notably, in September, the prime minister approved a cybercrime law that criminalizes dissent and puts user privacy at risk. The authorities also circulated two draft decrees that, if adopted, would increase restrictions on local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

### **Political Rights: 1 / 40 [Key]**

#### **A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12**

The ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP)'s 61-member Central Committee and 11-member Politburo make all major decisions. Legislative elections are held every five years but are not considered free or fair; international observers have not been permitted to monitor the polls. The LPRP vets all candidates for election to the National Assembly, whose members elect the president. In 2011, the legislature increased in size from 115 members to 132. In elections that year, the LPRP won 128 out of 132 seats. Choummaly Sayasonewas was chosen for a second term as president and Thongsing Thammavong as prime minister.

#### **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16**

The 1991 constitution makes the ruling LPRP the sole legal political party and grants it a leading role at all levels of government. National Assembly candidates are not required to be members of the LPRP, but all candidates have to be approved by Assembly-appointed committees; in practice, almost all are members of the party.

Ethnic minorities are represented in the Politburo, Central Committee, and National Assembly.

#### **C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12**

The National Assembly has grown more responsive to the public in recent years. The 2012 Law on Making Legislation increases legislative transparency by requiring bills proposed at the central and provincial levels to be published for comment for 60 days and, once passed, to be posted for 15 days before coming into force. The government is increasingly using laws, rather than decrees, to govern, though there is still little room for the public to influence policy.

Corruption by government officials is widespread. Laws aimed at curbing graft are rarely enforced, and government regulation of virtually every facet of life provides many opportunities for bribery. In July 2014, the head of the government's inspection authority reported to the National Assembly that since 2012 more

than \$150 million had been misappropriated due to various forms of corruption. According to state media, the official said that about \$63 million had been recovered and restored to state coffers. Laos was ranked 145 out of 175 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Displacement of villagers for dams and other government projects without proper compensation is common, though some in the government have begun to talk seriously about a strategy to address the country's land issues. Senior officials in government and the military are sometimes involved in commercial logging, mining, and other extractive enterprises.

## **Civil Liberties: 11 / 40**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 4 / 16**

Self-censorship is extremely prevalent, as authorities use legal and intimidation tactics against critics of the state. The state owns nearly all media, though some nongovernmental outlets, primarily Chinese entertainment magazines, have cropped up in recent years. A few independent local-interest radio shows have emerged. Journalists who criticize the government or discuss controversial issues risk punishment under the criminal code. Some Lao can access Radio Free Asia and other foreign broadcasts from Thailand.

Internet access and social media use have expanded in recent years, with 8 percent of the population going online in 2014 and more than 500,000 people accessing Facebook. In response, the government passed a restrictive cybercrime law in September 2014 that criminalizes the posting of vaguely defined content, including criticism of the LPRP or information that "distorts the truth." The law also prohibits the use of anonymous social media accounts and requires internet service providers to terminate access to users violating official decrees. In addition, the government must be provided with user information upon request.

Religious freedom is constrained. The religious practice of the majority Buddhist population is somewhat restricted through the LPRP's control of clergy training and supervision of temples. Discrimination against animists and other non-Buddhists does occur. Christians enjoy somewhat more freedom to worship, though in 2014, several cases emerged of Christians being briefly detained or evicted from their homes for refusing to renounce their faith and revert to animism, the dominant religion in their villages.

University professors cannot teach or write about politically sensitive topics, though Laos has invited select foreign academics to teach courses in the country, and some young people go overseas for university education. Government surveillance of the population has been scaled back in recent years, but searches without warrants still occur.

### **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12**

The government severely restricts freedom of assembly, prohibiting participation in organizations that engage in demonstrations or public protests, or that in any other way cause "turmoil or social instability." Protests are rare and violators can receive sentences of up to five years in prison. Two activists arrested in 1999 for participating in a peaceful protest remain behind bars on charges of treason.

Alongside LPRP-affiliated mass organizations, there are some domestic nongovernmental welfare and

professional groups, but they are prohibited from pursuing political agendas. After signing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2009, Laos created a legal framework for NGOs, allowing such groups to be licensed. This facilitated the proliferation of foreign NGOs in the country. Two new draft decrees were leaked in 2014, raising concerns that they would further restrict the activities of both international and local NGOs. The draft decrees call for annual registration processes for international groups, requirements to report or seek approval for foreign funding, and limitations on issue areas that local groups may work on. Neither of the decrees had been passed by year's end. Despite international pressure, the 2012 disappearance of prominent antipoverty activist Sombath Somphone remained unsolved and continued to exert a chilling effect over civil society.

All unions must belong to the official Lao Federation of Trade Unions. Strikes are not expressly prohibited, but workers rarely stage walkouts, and they do not have the right to bargain collectively.

## **F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16**

The courts are corrupt and controlled by the LPRP. Long procedural delays are common, particularly for cases dealing with public grievances. Security forces often illegally detain suspects. Torture of prisoners is occasionally reported and prisoners must bribe officials to obtain better food, medicine, family visits, and more humane treatment.

Discrimination against members of ethnic minority tribes is common. The Hmong, who fielded a guerrilla army allied with U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, are particularly distrusted by the government and face harsh treatment. Although some Hmong who are loyal to the LPRP have been elected to the national legislature, poorer and more rural Hmong have been forced off their land to make way for extractive industries. The government restricts the activity of more than 4,000 Hmong who were forcibly repatriated from Thailand in 2009 and live in camps in Borikhamxay province. Refugees who arrive in Laos are often mistreated and deported.

While same-sex sexual acts are legal and antigay violence is rare, no legislation provides explicit protection against discrimination based on sexual identity.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16**

All land is owned by the state, though citizens have rights to use it. On some occasions, the government has awarded land to citizens with government connections, money, or links to foreign companies. In February 2014, the government published a draft National Land Policy, which critics said would erode property rights by granting the state the ability to expropriate land for private investment and not only public benefit. In October 2014, Radio Free Asia reported that the government was also drafting an amendment to the land law that would allow foreign nationals to buy land, a right denied to Lao citizens. Neither document received final approval by year's end. Traditional land rights still exist in some areas, adding to confusion and conflict over access.

Ongoing dam projects have displaced indigenous populations who continue to face poverty and limited access to arable land for farming or rivers for fishing. The Xayaburi dam, a \$3.5-billion venture that will be used primarily to sell electricity to Thailand, has displaced more than 900 people, and activists say it will

negatively affect the livelihoods of 200,000 more. Construction of the Don Sahong dam was halted in August 2014 due to environmental concerns and complaints from neighboring Thailand and Cambodia. By the end of the year, construction has resumed.

Marriage to foreign citizens requires approval by the government. Although laws guarantee women many of the same rights as men, gender-based discrimination and abuse are widespread. Village-level leadership is responsible for many of the decisions affecting daily life, and fewer than 3 percent of village chiefs are women. Tradition and religious practices have contributed to women's inferior access to education, employment opportunities, and worker benefits.

Trafficking in persons, especially to Thailand, is common. Despite several dozen convictions each year, a lack of transparency, weak rule of law, and limited long-term assistance to victims hinder the effectiveness of antitrafficking efforts.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**